

**The economic “micro-cosmos” of Canton as a global entrepôt: Overseas trade, consumption and the Canton System from the Kangxi to Qianlong eras (1683–1795)**

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**Abstract**

Due to China’s ongoing economic rise, recent studies in global (economic) history have moved away from the traditional Eurocentric view to a Sinocentric one. There is extensive literature focused on the introduction of Chinese goods to Europe, as well as on China’s economic development within the framework of the great divergence debate. However, less research has centred on the introduction of European goods to Chinese markets, specifically the markets in Guangdong or other coastal regions (such as Fujian, Zhejiang and Jiangsu), before the First Opium War. This paper aims to side-step the Sinocentric approach, eschewing the current wave of national history in China, by analysing the international trade in Qing China from the Kangxi era until the Qianlong period. It provides new empirical evidence from the First Historical

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Archives of China (FHAC) by examining the impact on global trade of China's imperial edicts and interventionist policies.

**Keywords**

Global history, economic history, Canton System, commodity exchange, China, Europe, Qing dynasty

## **Introduction**

This essay focuses on the introduction of European goods to Macao-Canton for the period when the Canton System was established by the Qianlong emperor in 1757 in order to control western trade. The period from 1680 to 1757, which covers the reigns of Kangxi, Yongzheng and the first decades of Qianlong, was more open to international trade, putting an end to the tribute system.<sup>1</sup> In both periods, the opening to overseas trade by the Kangxi emperor and the control of foreign trade by Qianlong influenced merchants' drive to introduce European goods to China and to exchange American silver for Chinese goods destined for the West.<sup>2</sup>

This study will show how the Qing bureaucracy was inefficient in assessing and collecting customs revenues at multiple ports along the coast, a context that might explain the decision to centralise flows of exports as well as imports at Canton. However, even there the bureaucracy was incompetent, corrupt and beyond central control. Despite their anti-western rhetoric, these three emperors increased the volume of western imports into China. As we will demonstrate, the proclaimed antipathy of these emperors to exchanges and interactions with foreigners was based far more on a policy to control local Chinese merchants than a desire for autarky, which was not sustainable once population growth accelerated and Chinese agriculture could not produce enough food.

The impact of the circulation of Asian and Chinese goods in European societies has been widely studied, whereas there has been less research dealing with the

introduction of American and European goods in late Ming and Qing China.<sup>3</sup> In fact, there is a scholarly lacuna on the introduction of western commodities in Qing China, which arrived mainly through the Macao-Canton economic axis, and the distribution of such goods to coastal and inner areas of China.<sup>4</sup> The impact of global trade in regional economies of south China (mainly in the local communities of Fujian and Guangdong) and how this compared with the performance of the whole Chinese economy, along with state intervention during the Qianlong reign when the Canton System was implemented, requires further study.

To fully understand the China trade, merchants' motivations, alliances and the intervention of the state in local and international trade, it is important to analyse how the import and export trade in China was shaped by the Qing state, mainly because of the Canton System. Research that seeks out the connections, differences and similarities between European and Chinese markets could help to increase our knowledge of the China trade. Therefore, our methodology involves the use and analysis of primary sources from the First Historical Archives of China (FHAC) [*zhōngguó dìyī lìshǐ dāngànguǎn* 中国第一历史档案馆], located at the Forbidden City in Beijing.

### **The making of the Canton System: Why had Canton become the main entrepôt for foreign trade by 1840?**

Chinese historians traditionally analyse the economic performance of the Middle

Kingdom during the Qing period on a local level without seeking connections and/or comparisons with the rest of the world. Such scholarship conventionally takes the Opium War and/or the “Daoguang economic depression” as the catalysts for the secular economic recession in nineteenth-century China, which put an end to the prosperous economy of the eighteenth-century Qing period.<sup>5</sup> This transition established 1840 as the boundary between early modern and modern Chinese history.<sup>6</sup> The logic for this is based on the thinking of Marxist historians, who were more concerned with the country’s socio-political conditions. They argued that “the outbreak of the Opium War and the signing of the Sino-British Nanjing Treaty transformed China from a feudal society to a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society.”<sup>7</sup> In addition, the whole of the eighteenth century saw territorial expansion, frontier incorporation, economic growth, population boom, urbanization, cultural sophistication, and intensified global trade. Commonly called the Prosperous Age of the Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong, this period suddenly ended during the transition into the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

The performance of the Chinese economy and its recession, in the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, has generally been regarded in Chinese scholarship as very susceptible to external events. They consider the interference of foreign powers, such as Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, among others, in the Chinese economy led to China’s disastrous socio-economic development in mid- and late Qing China. This has also fed the sentiment of victimization in the Chinese public

psyche, which has also reached academic circles, where Westerners are seen as invaders and, therefore, as responsible for China's failure to modernise. Li Bozhong argues that "a profound inferiority complex [*qíngjié* 情结] developed in the Chinese public psyche from China's perceived backwardness relative to the West since the mid-nineteenth century."<sup>9</sup> This outlook became more ingrained when, more recently, scholars attempted to compare the modernisation of Qing China, under the Tongzhi reforms, with the Japan economic take-off during the Meiji Restoration.<sup>10</sup>

However, if we adopt a global history perspective, this description of China's economic development looks a bit narrow, as any analysis of China's economic performance should also consider the domestic economic swings and the effects of the highly interventionist Qing state, mainly during the Qianlong reign. China had been deeply involved in the world trade system since Spain reached the New World in the late fifteenth century and the Portuguese started to settle down in Macao during the sixteenth century. In this period, long before the Opium War, trade between China, south-eastern Asian regions and Europe flourished. Traditional Chinese scholarship describes the Canton System, established during the Qianlong period, as "a sign of closing the country."<sup>11</sup> This measure grew from the Qianlong emperor's order to the governor of Guangdong and Guangxi provinces [*Liang Guang Zong Du* 两广总督] in 1757 to "tell foreign businessmen that in the future they only could trade in Guangdong (Canton) and are not allowed to go to Ningbo. If there is any violation, they must escort the ship to return to Guangdong."<sup>12</sup>

However, even before Qianlong's edict, Canton was clearly the main import and export channel of Sino-European trade and occupied a strategic trade location in the Pearl River Delta, connecting with Macao where ships and their cargoes were supervised by the customs superintendents, popularly known as "hoppo."<sup>13</sup> The connection with Macao, where western communities (traders, diplomats, missionaries) were hosted, and southeast Asia (mainly Manila as Spanish entrepôt in the Pacific that connected the south China trade with the Americas), as well as interior provinces of China, made Canton the axis of global trade networks between European empires and the Middle Kingdom.<sup>14</sup> One of the most obvious reasons for restricting trade to the port at Canton was to make commerce more controllable and taxable by Qing officials as large ships could not easily navigate the narrow Canton river, which passed the Whampoa and Hanan islands, whereas in Macao ships could sail offshore and thus evade the control of the Qing authorities.<sup>15</sup> The Yongzheng emperor had attempted to control commerce in Canton by expelling the missionaries in 1724. However, it was the Qianlong emperor who finally established the Canton System to reinforce the overseas trade policy, eliminating the possibility for foreign ships to trade at ports outside Canton until 1840.

The evolution of the Canton System was the result of a number of factors such as the inability of the Qing state to collect customs revenues at multiple ports, the advantages of Canton's location, regional economic development, strong interventionism of the state (echoing the European mercantilist bans) and the Qing

regime's political and economic strategy. Another variable to consider for imposing one single port for foreign commerce [*yīkǒu tōngshāng* 一口通商] was the desire to control trade through official institutions and channels in order to eradicate contraband and smuggling activities, which were deeply rooted in the economic activities of business elites and families controlling commerce in south China.<sup>16</sup> Illegal or private imports and trade were rife among the officials and Qing bureaucrats who dealt with commerce, as well as among the Huizhou traders that controlled the salt monopoly trade.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, while the Canton System might have seemed to be directed mainly at foreign traders, the goal of controlling the local traders in China was also a vital concern. Directly interfering with the local traders was a risky move, however, especially given that the Qing dynasty was Manchu (a foreign dynasty) and not Han (the local dynasty). Stirring up resentment among the Han could have serious consequences for the survival of the dynasty, as the threat of uprisings and rebellions was very real. Enforcement by the emperor of new policies and bans on local traders may well have provoked a violent revolt. The aim was thus to restrict all foreign trade to one location that could be controlled from Beijing.

Since 1683, the Kangxi emperor had allowed maritime trade through the Jiang/Jiangsu Customs [*jiāng hǎiguān* 江海关], Zhe/Zhejiang/Ningbo Customs [*zhè hǎiguān* 浙海关], Min/Fujian Customs [*mǐn hǎiguān* 闽海关] and Yue/Canton Customs [*yuè hǎiguān* 粤海关].<sup>18</sup> As one of the four major customs offices opened during the early and mid-Qing dynasty, the Canton Customs had the same function as



the other three, but its special feature was its connection with Macao, a strategic port for foreign trade. Thus, Canton had always been a major port for foreign merchant ships (figure 1). The other three customs offices were also responsible for foreign trade, but they functioned with a more unstructured system. This demonstrates the incapacity of the central state, the Qing court of Beijing, to regulate foreign trade through provincial institutions.



**Figure 1: Canton in 1670**

This small print of the city of Canton shows sailing boats and junks trading in the port between the river and walled city. Illustrations were taken from early historical sources. Courtesy of Zhongguo tongshangtu: 17-19 shiji xifang renyan zhong de zhongguo, Beijing: Beijing Ligongdaxue chunbanshe, 2008.

A memorandum written by Hao Yulin 郝玉麟, governor of Fujian and Zhejiang provinces, to the Qianlong emperor in 1737 reveals the structural inadequacy of the Min Customs in dealing with foreign merchants, particularly through the negligence and lack of procedures of this official institution and its bureaucrats for tax collection.<sup>19</sup> A case in point: in August of 1737, a Luzon ship carrying goods such as logwood arrived to trade in the port of Xiamen, Fujian province. To determine the tax

due, local officials searched previous records. They found that an English ship had come to the Min Customs two years earlier, in 1735, and that the Canton Customs determined that, apart from the regular tax assigned, they should also charge 0.049 per cent per *tael* of silver of the money which foreign merchants bring to purchase goods in China, a tax called *fen tou yin* 分头银. Further, 0.1 per cent per *tael* of silver, called *jiao song yin* 缴送银, should be charged along with 90 other forms of fee collection.

The Min Customs did not complete the tax report for the British ship, which sailed back to Canton. Later, in 1737, they mistakenly charged the same tax bracket as the British and European ships for the cargo that had arrived from Luzon (in the Philippines). Zhun Tai 淮泰, the former governor of Guangdong and Guangxi Provinces, reported to his officials that foreign merchant ships, from neighbouring areas of south-eastern Asia, such as Luzon, should not be charged the 0.049 per cent *fen tou yin* tax. Such charges were only to be applied to ships coming from distant countries, namely ships from Europe.

Following previous research on tax collection in coastal areas of China (mainly Fujian and Guangdong provinces) we should ask whether this apparent negligence of local officials was a result of their incapacity to perform their task or because of personal alliances with local elites and foreign traders seeking to divert taxes.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, the Min Customs refunded the *fen tou yin* to the Luzon ship. Similarly, in 1755 when a British ship tried to trade at the Zhe Customs, the incumbent governor of Fujian and Zhejiang provinces, Ka'erjishan 喀尔吉善, quickly reported this to the

Qianlong emperor and a new tax rule was drafted.<sup>21</sup> Importantly, these imperial reports reflect the official situation, as they were the only channel of communication between the emperor and local officials. To obtain an accurate view of the economic system and the incapacity of the state to negotiate with local elites and manage an efficient system of tax collection, we should, as Peter Perdue suggests, observe the biographies and personal trajectories of local officials. Often these bureaucrats were involved in trade or smuggling activities, and their families made a fortune and passed the Chinese Imperial examination system as a result of their social promotion in business.<sup>22</sup> This local approach allows us to better understand the functioning of long-distance business partnerships between local traders of south China with westerners, as well as the global conjunctures in Chinese localities and villages.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, we might conclude that the management of foreign trade was ineffectual in the coastal regions of China, where the Jiang/Jiangsu Customs [*jiāng hǎiguān* 江海关], Zhe/Zhejiang/Ningbo Customs [*zhè hǎiguān* 浙海关], Min/Fujian Customs [*mǐn hǎiguān* 闽海关] and Yue/Canton Customs [*yuè hǎiguān* 粤海关] were established by Kangxi and continued by Yongzheng, until Qianlong restricted foreign trade to Canton. Indeed, the tax system was quite disorganised, and bureaucratic negligence was common among officials, who received low salaries from the central government in Beijing.<sup>24</sup> An unofficial system therefore emerged, based on alliances and business partnerships between local and foreign traders who diverted funds and tax revenues to increase their personal fortunes.

It was extremely difficult for the government to control this unofficial system based on trade circuits, which then continued over generations, contributing to the status and honour of local families who displayed their economic and political power in their genealogies. This demonstrated the inability of the Qing state to create a solid system of tax collection and management of trade revenues and economic resources.<sup>25</sup> Canton was in a strategic geographical location for the export and import of goods, and became a major hub of foreign trade, but it was mainly seen as a way of controlling local trade and supervising the elites who made their fortunes and built their family reputations by dealing with foreign partners and accumulating highly valued American silver coins.<sup>26</sup>

The Qianlong emperor's 1757 decree formally blocked the entry of foreign merchant ships to the three ports in Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Fujian. But why did the emperor choose Canton? Although Guangdong had a long history of foreign trade because of its geographical location, foreign trade was concentrated in Canton mainly because the Qing state was incapable of collecting taxes in several ports, leading to the centralization of imports and exports in one single port. When the decree was issued, foreigners were forbidden from living in Guangdong, and therefore most of them resided in Macao. This made Macao the cornerstone of trade and socio-cultural exchanges between China and the West. This policy sought to control the foreign community in China, as well as to attempt to regulate the unofficial trade activities between south China gentry and foreign merchants. Central government officials,

local Canton officials, as well as the Canton Customs formed a large group of interest, developing an informal network, and, ultimately, an unofficial long-lasting partnership against the state. This was rooted in the early Qing dynasty and even long before during the Ming dynasty.<sup>27</sup> The Canton Customs collected a large amount of tax revenue every year for the national treasury. Personnel working at the Canton Customs, such as directors, secretaries and clerks, were recruited directly by the court.<sup>28</sup>

From the Kangxi to Daoguang eras, which saw five emperors within nearly 200 years, the official appointments to the Canton Customs fostered an ecosystem based on unofficial trade reaching the entire Guangdong region. During Kangxi's reign, the position of customs superintendents (the hoppos) was created to eradicate corruption and to prevent the misappropriation of customs revenues. The positions of Canton Customs supervisor [*Yue Hai Guan Jian Du* 粤海关监督] and governor of the Guangdong and Guangxi provinces were known to be very lucrative and only favourites of the Emperor were appointed to these roles. Local officials and even the emperor himself pocketed part of the revenue collected. Any staff member or soldier who worked in the Canton Customs could find opportunities for corruption in foreign trade, thus boosting their personal careers and family fortunes.

According to a memorandum addressed to the Qianlong emperor in 1742, written by a Canton Customs supervisor called Yilaqi 伊拉齐, there were 47 customs ports under the jurisdiction of Canton Customs, from Guangzhou to Macao, Qiongzhou,

Chaozhou, Huizhou, Gaozhou, etc. The Canton Customs supervisor – along with at least 30 subordinates – spent two months inspecting the area of his jurisdiction but he was not able to visit all the ports in person.<sup>29</sup> Because of the extensive bureaucracy of the Canton Customs and its reliance on clerks and sub-officials whose salaries – and skill level – were low, the whole network of Canton Customs officials was closely associated with merchants. The family wealth accumulated by those officials mainly came from trade activities.

These trade networks can be divided into three groups: Hong merchants, foreign merchants and local merchants.<sup>30</sup> All were under the direct supervision of customs superintendents [*hùbù* 戶部 or hoppo] and the governor of Guangxi and Guangdong province [*dūfǔ* 督撫].<sup>31</sup> The Hong merchants were the only officially designated brokers who could trade with foreign agents. The activities of foreign merchants in Guangzhou, whether selling their own goods or buying Chinese goods, or even paying taxes, were all subject to the supervision of the Hong merchants. These Hong merchants were extremely wealthy, had close ties to the local officials and were also responsible for arranging overseas capital (through long-distance partnerships) and the import of goods. Foreign merchants introduced overseas goods to China through the Macao-Canton economic axis, which became the main channel for the trade and exchange of goods between China and southeast Asia, Japan, and the Americas, and ultimately with Europe.<sup>32</sup> Local Chinese merchants were the main social agents involved in purchasing goods from overseas and inland Chinese regions, serving as

mediators and brokers in Guangdong and introducing foreign goods to other regions of China. This system developed a dense micro-network in south China in which a large group of people was involved in these trade activities; it was difficult for the state to control and regulate this network, which naturally established its own rules and *modus operandi*.<sup>33</sup> The destruction of this unofficial system would have damaged the employment and livelihoods of not only the staff of the Canton Customs, but also the wider group of related practitioners – merchants, craftsmen, deliverymen, brokers, among others.

In 1755, the English merchant James Flint 洪仁辉 arrived at the Zhejiang Customs, and while the Zhejiang officials sought to open trade with foreigners, opening trade was against the interests of the Canton group. The Qianlong emperor subsequently issued a decree stipulating that all foreign merchant ships must return to Canton for trade. Qianlong's reign was defined by rigidity and strong command; indeed, he was a paradigm of the “mercantilist ruler.” He wanted to rule with a firm hand, to be seen as a good lord to his subjects, as well to protect the Han culture from western invaders, despite the fact that, as a Manchu ruler, he was himself a foreigner. Scholars consider the well-known *Flint Affair* [*Hong Renhui Shijian*, 洪任辉事件] as the event that made Qianlong implement the Canton System to prevent foreign interference in China affairs.<sup>34</sup> However, as mentioned earlier, we believe that the real reason behind the Canton System was control of local Chinese trade – despite making foreigners the main official target of the policy.

Furthermore, the Qing government primarily sought to assure the stability and unity of the Middle Kingdom in the hands of a foreign (Manchu) dynasty. It therefore rejected many opportunities for foreign trade and avoided any possibly destabilizing course of action. As a Manchu government, the Qing emperors and the nobles of the Eight Flags came from the Changbai Mountain area, located north of Shanhaiguan. They had conquered the Central Plains of China and become rulers over the (majority) Han population.<sup>35</sup> In order to establish their authority and rule, they had violently suppressed any resistance of the Han people and even exiled some Han overseas. The Qing government always enforced a very strict control over the people to prevent the emergence of rebellious forces.<sup>36</sup> Foreigners were confined to Macao and were expressly forbidden from living in Guangzhou. Migration to other regions and provinces, even in the case of Chinese businessmen bringing their foreign wives back home, was strictly regulated and required official authorisation – without which heavy penalties could be incurred.<sup>37</sup> The Qing rulers were also concerned that exiled Han people would collude with foreigners in order to undermine the regime.

In 1755, the British merchant ship that sailed to Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, gave the Qianlong emperor cause for concern. It was reported by local officials that there were forty boatmen on the merchant ship without pigtails.<sup>38</sup> Although it was confirmed afterwards that part of the ship crew were foreigners living in Macao, Qianlong might have had reason for concern. The pigtail was the traditional hairstyle of the Manchu people – most of the head was shaved, leaving a small disc of hair that



was tied back. However, cutting hair was forbidden in traditional Han culture. In order to establish the rule and authority of the Manchu government, the Shunzhi emperor issued the “hair shaving order” in 1644: “Keep your hair or keep your head” [*liú tóu bù liú fà, liú fà bù liú tóu* 留头不留发，留发不留头].<sup>39</sup>

Over the following centuries, small-scale uprisings and riots would occasionally occur and the Qing rulers paid special attention to this “hair identity” as a symbol of allegiance to the empire: it thus became a way of controlling the population.<sup>40</sup> James Flint tried to appeal to the emperor after failing in his enterprise to trade in Ningbo, although he was very likely to have had ulterior motives. He was finally convicted for his attempt to denounce corruption and was banned from Macao for three years.<sup>41</sup> Emperor Qianlong believed that, compared to Ningbo, Canton was far more accessible for long-distance driving into the hinterland of the Central Plains, and therefore better placed to control overseas trade and potential Han incursions.<sup>42</sup> For all these reasons, the Canton System continued until the Opium War erupted and the British forced the Qing government to open other ports up to trade.

### **The self-sufficiency of the Qing economy and the exchange of goods at the Canton Customs**

The rigid implementation of rules to control trade in south China, first through the customs system established by the Kangxi emperor and continued by his son (Yongzheng), and then through Qianlong’s imperial edict limiting foreign trade to

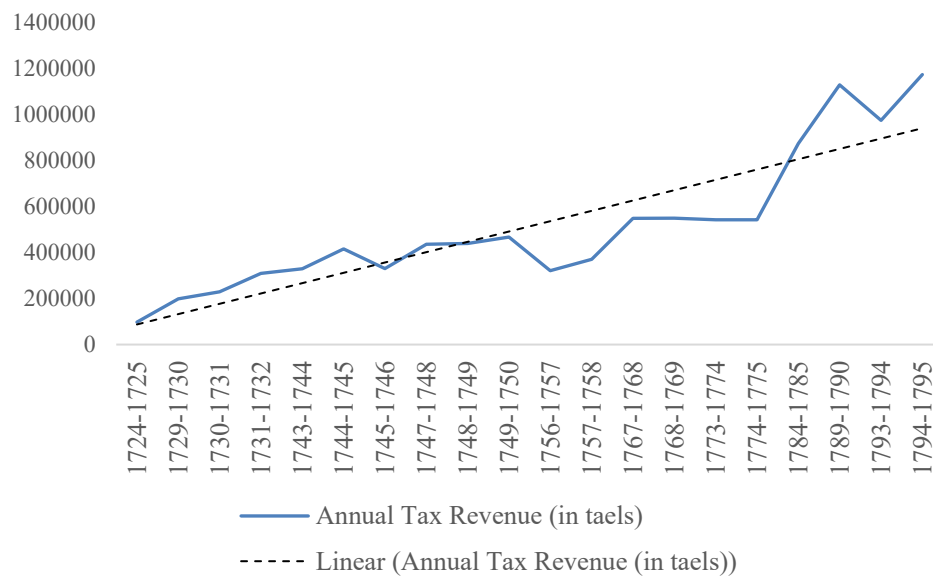
Canton, had a negative impact on the state's capacity to eradicate corruption and smuggling. Despite the increasing number of officials, growing institutions, and expanding list of imperial decrees issued to supervise local and overseas trade, the state remained powerless to control the complex trade networks that had evolved. Indeed, corruption was widespread in the very institutions designed to stamp out illicit activities.<sup>43</sup> Despite this, Canton continued to be a major hub for foreign trade – in fact, it was the world trade centre in south China during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – with exports of Chinese goods to Asian and western regions and imports from the West. The accumulation of American silver in the hands of Chinese private merchants was the main driver, on a micro-scale, that boosted exchanges, allowing local traders to increase their family fortune and reputation, while escaping the control of the Qing state.

The memoranda that the local officials provided to the emperors, allow us to trace this world trade network, which connected the Guangdong region to Europe through western merchant ships (either arriving from Europe through the Indian maritime routes, or from the Americas, through the Pacific routes), bringing silver to China and exporting Chinese goods (mainly tea, silk and porcelain). These western traders also introduced goods to China's coastal regions, from which they were distributed to inland China. The goods listed in the memoranda included woollen fabrics, spices, black lead and medicinal herbs, among other commodities. During the Yongzheng and Qianlong periods, the Canton Customs would collect several hundred thousand silver

*taels* in tax revenues annually. There was a commodity commercial tax [*shāngshuì* 商税] for outbound ships and a foreign tax [*yángshuì* 洋税] for overseas merchants. A report sent to the emperor in 1743 suggests that “from each foreign merchant ship we can collect an income of about ten thousand *taels* of silver, every year there will be around 10 to 15 foreign ships to come.”<sup>44</sup> In the tenth year of the Yongzheng emperor’s reign (1732), the Canton Customs collected 309,107 *taels* of silver. During Qianlong’s fortieth year of reign (1775) the tariffs brought in 541,863 *taels* and by his 60<sup>th</sup> year (1795) income had almost doubled to 1,171,911 *taels* (see figure 2).<sup>45</sup>

Even though in 1757, when the Canton System was established, there was a sudden dip in the annual tax revenues of the Canton Customs, the general trend of the annual tax revenues was positive over the second half of the eighteenth century (see figure 2). This holds particularly true during the late 1770s, when the “formal mercantile cartel of the Co-hong [*gōng háng* 公行]” was consolidated, allowing foreign supercargoes to permanently reside in Canton – which, in turn, increased the circulation of foreign goods, and therefore, the annual revenue of the Canton Customs.<sup>46</sup> The Canton Customs tax revenue reports were submitted on an annual basis following the seasonality of sea-faring and agricultural activities. The tax bureau could thus start the account in any month of the year and finish it twelve months later. For this reason, the annual data series was calculated with a double entry (biannual basis), but in fact the accounting system was made annually. These are the so-called “year-node divisions,” which referred to the solar periods in which the Chinese lunar

calendar is divided and, as the Canton Customs reports show, the month of calculation for every year was arranged randomly depending on the seasonality, forecast or predicted weather conditions for agricultural activities and maritime trade.<sup>47</sup>



**Figure 2: Annual Tax Revenue of Canton Customs from the Kangxi to Qianlong Era**

Authors' own elaboration. Courtesy of ZPZZ, FHAC, ref. number 04-01-35-0307-005, 04-01-35-0307-022, 04-01-35-0307-026, 04-01-35-0307-030, 04-01-35-0317-025, 04-01-35-0318-046, 04-01-35-0321-027, 04-01-35-0323-025, 04-01-35-0325-013, 04-01-35-0327-011, 04-01-35-0331-002, 04-01-35-0331-002, 04-01-35-0340-009, 04-01-35-0340-008, 04-01-35-0346-028, 04-01-35-0346-028, 04-01-35-0352-030, 04-01-35-0353-045, 04-01-35-0357-039, 04-01-35-0358-040.

The expansion of the global maritime trade and the growing demand for Chinese goods by western traders in the second half of the eighteenth century led to a substantial rise in China's foreign trade tariffs.<sup>48</sup> In contrast to Europe's enthusiasm for commodity trade, the Qing rulers, mainly the Qianlong emperor, reinforced mercantilist policies to increase tariffs on imports. Qianlong might be considered the

paradigm in China of the European mercantilist ruler, even a physiocrat, because of his view of China as a self-sufficient economy and determination to foster national production. “There is nothing we don’t have that we need from you,” he told Lord Macartney, who had been sent on mission to China in 1792 by the British King George III.<sup>49</sup> The imperial policies were designed to increase capital accumulation and paid close attention to commodity exports.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a relevant share of the state’s fiscal revenues came from land tax, as well as custom duties. Most regions of China relied on agricultural production, as capitalism only really developed in the more trade-oriented south-eastern coastal regions. Overall, the economy of Qing China was primarily based on the ecological environment, which was essentially independent of – or geographically isolated from – the international trade system.<sup>50</sup> In the 1760s, Qianlong even restricted the export of silk products, as he believed that overseas traders were exchanging Chinese silks and introducing foreign goods that could affect the demand for local products in domestic markets.<sup>51</sup> This resembles the mercantilist policies issued during the same period by European monarchs.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the Qing government retained stricter control over food exports. The local Hong merchants and brokers were forbidden from selling large amounts of grain to foreign traders; ship cargoes were inspected to prevent exports of large quantities of foodstuffs. Local officials were required to report regularly to the emperor that they had stringently enforced the ban on excess grain outflow.<sup>53</sup> These measures were surely motivated by

the food shortages experienced during the Qing dynasty.

But was it really true that China needed nothing from other countries, as the Qianlong emperor had boasted to Lord Macartney? They certainly needed grain and American crops. During the Qianlong period, there was a significant population boom which set China on the path of the so-called “high level equilibrium trap.”<sup>54</sup> The population of China had reached 400 million by the end of eighteenth century.<sup>55</sup> Food shortages were particularly acute in the south-eastern coastal areas, which were densely populated but had relatively little cultivated land.<sup>56</sup> Farm economies were heavily contingent on climate conditions. Unfavourable weather conditions (such as drought) could have disastrous impacts on the food supply of large populations.<sup>57</sup> The introduction and consumption of American crops (potato, maize, sweet potato), which had been introduced in China by the end of Ming dynasty through the Manila galleons, helped to mitigate such food shortages.<sup>58</sup>

Food shortages were also a common catalyst for public uprisings, which the Qing government was desperate to prevent. It had therefore considered various ways of averting a famine. To counteract the high-level equilibrium trap, wine prohibition became one of the measures taken to manage food shortages. Since traditional Chinese wine was made from grain, limiting cereal production for consumption as a food, not as a beverage, was a strategy to combat the scarcity of food. Farmland was therefore to be reserved for the cultivation of grain, not for viticulture.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the Qing government also encouraged local merchants to trade with neighbouring

Asian regions to open up a supply of food and grains to Chinese regions.

A memorandum written in 1761 by Li Shiyao 李侍尧, the governor of the Guangdong and Guangxi province, notes:

referring to the previous case of the Fujian province, merchants who brought more than 2,000 *dan* of grain from foreign countries could get an official rank promotion. The previous year a businessman named Wang Chao, from Chenghai county, used his own capital, took the vessel of Chen Fushun, and bought 2,646 *dan* of rice from Annam. In accordance with the regulations of 2000 *dan* or more, he should be awarded with promotion to the ninth rank.<sup>60</sup>

The ninth rank was the lowest official rank, and while businessmen who obtained official titles acquired no special political power, they invariably experienced a rise in their wealth and reputation as a result of these promotions. This privilege was passed on to later generations. To some extent, it also helped them to forge closer relationships with local officials, shaping a dense network of socio-economic and political power. As well as buying grain, since 1745 the Qing government had also attempted to buy copper from foreign businessmen to mint coins.<sup>61</sup> In 1749, foreign coins were popular in the market of the Zhejiang area. Zhejiang's governor, Fang Chengguan 方承观, thought these illegal coins should be destroyed and called on other provinces to do the same. However, Qianlong believed that these coins should be recycled and re-minted.<sup>62</sup>

To sum up, we observe that the Qing rulers, specifically the Qianlong emperor,

were keen to import food and raw materials from foreign countries, but also European luxury goods such as wool, glass, handicrafts, mirrors, clocks (indeed, the emperor was an avid collector of clocks, which he housed in one of the pavilions at the Imperial Court), as well as foreign wines and liquors. These western goods were extremely sought after, especially by the imperial family, who were the main consumers of western luxury goods, but also among the elites and Guangdong officials. This exemplifies a trickle-down effect that begins at the highest echelons of Chinese society, with the emperor himself and his court, moving down to the gentry who wanted to emulate this consumption of new and exotic luxury goods.<sup>63</sup> Each year, the emperor ordered Guangdong officials to purchase supplies for the Imperial Household Department, including local products from the Guangdong region and goods from foreign traders. The Kangxi emperor also asked Guangdong officials to collect information from foreigners, and even kept a group of foreigners, the Jesuits, close to the Beijing court to serve the imperial family. His son, Yongzheng, despite having officially banned Christianity from China, housed a group of Christian missionaries at the Beijing court to work as scientists, artists and technicians.<sup>64</sup>

The large number of historical documents that we have analysed at the FHAC, mainly relating to the policies and memoranda of different emperors, can also shed some light on the personalities and preferences of some of the emperors. For example, the Kangxi emperor (1661–1722) had a particular fascination with western culture, science and technology, as well as foreign goods. He was especially interested in



astronomy and geography. He appointed the Jesuit Ferdinand Verbiest [Nan Huai ren 南怀仁] as the Astronomical Bureau Officer [*qīn tiān jiān jiān zhēng* 钦天监监正] to revise the astronomical calendar and in 1674 he ordered the Great Universal Geographic Map [*kūn yú quán tú* 坤輿全图].<sup>65</sup> When foreign scientists came to Guangdong, Kangxi was eager to meet them, telling local government officials: “Let them come to Beijing as soon as possible.”<sup>66</sup> The Guangdong administrators were well aware of the Kangxi’s interest in western culture and in foreigners and local officials often informed him about the arrival of westerners.

The Yongzheng emperor (who reigned from 1723–1735), Kangxi’s son, was more uncompromising than his father. His attitude to finances was more cautious and he was particularly concerned with the reform of China’s economy. Unlike his father, he had little interest in science and western luxury goods. He issued a ban on the purchase of ivory products due to its excessive cost.<sup>67</sup> He believed that the Canton Customs should work to increase tariffs, and not to foster overseas trade and introduce foreign goods. Indeed, the customs duties of the Canton Customs were an important source of income for the national treasury. Nevertheless, Yongzheng relied on Guangdong officials to purchase overseas textiles and medicinal herbs for the Imperial Household Department.<sup>68</sup>

Yongzheng’s son, Qianlong (1736–1795), inherited great wealth from his father. The Qianlong emperor – like his grandfather – had a taste for exotic goods, and he often asked local officials to procure luxury items and high-quality crafts. According

to a 1758 report sent to Qianlong from the governor of Guangdong and Guangxi Provinces, Li Shiyao, the emperor had asked Guangdong officials to “purchase for me clocks, western gold beads, exotic furnishings, gold threads, new style objects, etc. Don’t worry about the cost.”<sup>69</sup> Later, Li Shiyao purchased several gold-plated decorations, striking clocks, musical clocks, wall clocks, snuff bottles, glassware, drawing tools, and pearls for him and noted that “we have spent 6,612.6 *taels* of silver on these, minus the 15,558.4 spent last year for the Duanyang festival, of the 30,000 *taels* now there are 7,828.9 *taels* left. Should I give the money to the Ministry of Revenue or the Canton Customs vault?” The emperor replied: “Keep it and use it in the future.”<sup>70</sup>

The next year Li Shiyao submitted another report explaining that he had spent 2,503.1 *taels* looking for agate stone goods.<sup>71</sup> This demonstrates the conspicuous consumption fostered by the Qianlong emperor, for whom high costs was not an issue. He took great delight in acquiring rare and luxury foreign goods, despite banning their consumption for the rest of the country. Today, the museum of the Forbidden City exhibits the exquisite collection of western clocks and exotic ornaments of the Qianlong era. These items are unrivalled in quality and taste. Indeed, Qianlong was rather unenthusiastic about the *beaux gestes* offered by the British envoy, Lord Macartney, as his own collections surpassed the items the diplomat had brought to impress the emperor.

The gentry and wealthy businessmen of the Qing dynasty also showed great

interest in luxury western goods. In 1743, as part of an investigation into corruption, the home of the Canton Customs supervisor, Zheng Wusai, was searched and a great quantity of antiques, jewellery, as well as western ornaments, glassware and exotic silk fabrics were discovered. The officials responsible for handling the case proposed that these recovered illicit goods should be sent to the Imperial Household Department and presented to the imperial family.<sup>72</sup> We might infer that the emperor's enjoyment of foreign luxury goods influenced other officials, but the thriving business of southern local officials, from Guangdong, also shaped Qianlong's desire for luxury goods. There was thus a "trickle up" effect as well as a "trickle down" effect for the consumption of luxury goods, which triggered corruption and the misappropriation of tax funds. In addition, we can assume that not only officials and gentry, but also the social elite were motivated by this drive for the conspicuous consumption of western luxury goods, which had become symbols of wealth and social distinction.

## **Conclusion**

The body of data used for this research includes previously overlooked historical sources from the imperial archives, the FHAC, which houses very rich sources such as edicts, memoranda, imperial correspondence, among others, that constituted the main channel of communication between the emperors and local officials in China's provinces. This study uses these primary sources to analyse the rationale and foundations behind the Canton System, concentrating in particular on: 1. how

Canton's unique geographical location contributed to shape a tight micro-network of local traders; 2. how it became a stable and unofficial economic system that fostered long-term foreign trade and capital accumulation, allowing local family groups and traders to thrive; 3. more specifically, how the Qing government used the Canton System not only to control foreign traders and foreigners in one single location, but also to watch the mainly Chinese local merchants whose wealth was rising through – often illicit – alliances and partnerships with foreign merchants. Behind this official system, with Canton the only port in China for foreign trade, the emperors and the entire Guangdong network of traders, local officials and gentry, as well as the Qing ruler, sought to create an economically stable regime, despite it being – in practice – run by unofficial activities, smuggling, and the widespread diverting of tax funds to line private pockets. China had a history of feudal rule for thousands of years and had formed a relatively independent and complete economic system with its own particularities. In other words, it was an economic micro-cosmos of merchants and officials who created a “system within the system.”

In the early and mid-Qing period, before the outbreak of the Opium War and mainly during the Qianlong emperor's reign, the Qing government did not officially foster a large-scale foreign trade. In reality, Qianlong eagerly encouraged local officials to purchase foreign goods and luxury items which provided a high profit for the state revenues. A self-sufficient economy was the main, official, objective of the Qing rulers. Their conservative and rigid attitude aimed to maintain a stable political

regime and avoid social turmoil or uprisings. They feared the possible impact of a reform of the fiscal system, which would have involved dismissing local gentry and traders from the unofficial but highly lucrative system. For this reason, as discussed, the Qianlong emperor restricted the exports of silk and grain and encouraged the imports of goods.

Qianlong was also aware of the need to import some food and natural resources to avoid environmental degradation and to preserve local economic structures. European empires had a marked maritime-trade orientation. In contrast, due to the immense geography of the Middle Kingdom (mainly through the Manchu expansion to western regions), the Qing emperors sought to unify this vast mass of land, an inland empire that was expanding westward, and to provide enough domestic supplies to the population. However, the Qing emperors still revealed their personal choices and preferences through their consumption of luxury western goods, a practice which spread throughout the upper ranks of the social hierarchy, and “trickled down” to the lower social classes, including local officials and businessmen.

By analysing the imperial edicts housed at the FHAC, we gain a better understanding of the functioning of foreign trade in China during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, mainly in the southern provinces such as Guangdong, from a micro-perspective, as well as why the economic Macao-Canton axis came to be a global trade hub. However, these sources have some obvious limitations, as they do not provide data on the economic circulation of these goods from suppliers to

consumers. Although the total tariff incomes of the Canton System can be calculated annually, we are not able to determine the precise typologies of goods that were being taxed. Second, although we have an approximation of the kinds of luxury goods that were purchased by (or for) the emperors, it is difficult to estimate the real expenditure. However, the trend toward conspicuous consumption and the large expenditure on luxury goods can be deduced as a symbol of power. Also, a lack of data prevents us from quantifying consumption across different social groups. A further limitation is the fact that the FHAC has lost and misclassified some historical sources of the Kangxi emperor's reign, as well as some relevant foreign-politics files. Ongoing research providing data on import and export tax bills, merchant contracts and letters, local gazetteers, as well as manuscripts by scholars will help close the above-mentioned gaps and unveil a clearer picture of trade in imperial China, the Canton System and Canton as a global entrepôt.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to Fairbank, the tribute system consisted of a network of informal relations, “a set of ideas and practices developed and perpetuated by the rulers of China over many centuries,” which fostered trade between China and foreign territories. See: Ji-Young Lee, *China's Hegemony*, 28–29. Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order*; Fairbank, “Tributary Trade,” 129–149.

<sup>2</sup> Von Glahn, *Fountain of Fortune*; Irigoien, “The End of a Silver Era”; Flynn and

Giraldez, *China and the Birth of Globalization*.

<sup>3</sup> Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce*; Batchelor, “On the Movement of Porcelains,” 95–121; Perez–Garcia, *Vicarious Consumers*; Gerritsen and McDowall, “Material Culture and the Other,” 87–113; McNeil and Riello, *Luxury: A Rich History*; McCants, “Global History and the History of Consumption,” 241–254; De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*; Perez–Garcia, “Challenging National Narratives,” 53–80; Ping–Ti Ho, “On the Introduction, Distribution of American Crops,” 21–41; Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*.

<sup>4</sup> Only a few studies deal with the introduction of western goods to China and they tend to focus on the supply side, mainly analysing British and Dutch trade companies such as the E.I.C. or V.O.C. There is still a lack of research on how the Qing trade policies affected international trade and how the preferences of local traders and consumers changed. See: Dermigny, *La Chine et l’Occident*; Van Dyke, *Merchants of Canton and Macao*; Ptak, *China’s Seaborne Trade*; Li Bozhong, *Agricultural Development*; De Souza, *The Survival of the Empire*.

<sup>5</sup> Wu Chengming, *Zhongguo de Xiandaihua*; Li Bozhong, “The Daoguang Depression,” 173–178. Ni Yuping, “Steady Customs Duties,” 78–91.

<sup>6</sup> Liu Chao, “Ya Pian Zhan Zheng Yu Zhong Guo Jin Dai Shi Yan Jiu,” 146.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Cao, Li and Yang, “Mt. Tambora, Climatic Changes,” 597.

- <sup>9</sup> Li Bozhong, *Lilun, Fangfa, Fazhan Qusi*.
- <sup>10</sup> Westad, *Restless Empire*.
- <sup>11</sup> Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China*, 4.
- <sup>12</sup> Jun Ji Chu Shang Yu Dang (JJCSYD), First Historical Archives of China (FHAC), 10<sup>th</sup> November, Qianlong 21<sup>st</sup> Year (1756).
- <sup>13</sup> Cheong, *Hong Merchants of Canton*; De Souza, *The Survival of the Empire*, 1986.
- <sup>14</sup> Blussé, *Visible Cities*.
- <sup>15</sup> Menegon, “Interlopers,” 33.
- <sup>16</sup> Liang Jiabin, *Guangdong shi san hang kao*; De Sousa, *The Early European Presence*.
- <sup>17</sup> McDermott, *The Making of a New Rural Order*; Zhang Yi, *Neo-Confucianism*; Wang Zhengzhong, “The Regulation of Sailors”; Elman and Liu, 221–228.
- <sup>18</sup> Nei Ge Qi Ju Zhu, FHAC, 11<sup>th</sup> July, Kangxi 23<sup>rd</sup> Year (1684). *Qing Gong Guang Zhou Shi San Hang Dang An Jing Xuan*. 39.
- <sup>19</sup> Zhu Pi Zou Zhe (ZPZZ), FHAC, 04–01–35–0310–011.
- <sup>20</sup> Perdue, “Interlopers,” 63–83; Menegon, “Interlopers,” 26–62.
- <sup>21</sup> FHAC, *Ming Qing Gong Cang Zhong Xi Shang Mao Dang An*, 989–1093.
- <sup>22</sup> Peter Purdue discusses the trajectories of key social actors from Canton during the 1850s, such as Wu Jianzhang, Liu Lichuan, Fujian, and Lin Xiyuan, whose social promotion through business activities and political intrigues (ties with secret societies) were rooted in illegal activities and diverting customs funds, sometimes undermining



the Qing authorities and in some cases working with them. See Purdue “Interlopers,” 64–67.

<sup>23</sup> Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy*; Brook, *Vermeer’s hat*.

<sup>24</sup> Ho, *Studies on the Population*.

<sup>25</sup> McDermott, *The Making of a New Rural Order*.

<sup>26</sup> Von Glahn, *Fountain of Fortune*, 1996; Irigoien, “The end of a silver era.”

<sup>27</sup> McDermott, *The Making of a New Rural Order*; Purdue, *China Marches West*; Miller, *State versus Gentry*.

<sup>28</sup> Zhao, *The Qing Opening*.

<sup>29</sup> ZPZZ, FHAC, 04–01–35–0314–007.

<sup>30</sup> Van Dyke, *Merchants of Canton and Macao*, 7–9.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Perez–Garcia, “Challenging National Narratives,” 53–80; Wang Zhengzhong, “The Regulation of Sailors,” 221–228; Antony, “Piracy and the Shadow Economy,” 99–114.

<sup>33</sup> Gipouloux, *The Asian Mediterranean*.

<sup>34</sup> Schottenhammer, “The East Asian Maritime World,” 2.

<sup>35</sup> Purdue, *China Marches West*.

<sup>36</sup> Ho–fung Hung, “Cultural Strategies,” 75–115.

<sup>37</sup> ZPZZ, FHAC, 04–01–01–0204–003.

<sup>38</sup> Lu Fu Zou Zhe (LFZZ), FHAC, 03–0092–060.

- <sup>39</sup> Han Tan, Jiang Yin Cheng Shou Ji. *Zhao Ximing*, “*Jiang shang gu zhong lu*,” 3–11.
- <sup>40</sup> Zhu Zheng, ‘Bian Zi De Lai Li’, 33–34.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ming Qing Shi Qi Ao Men Wen Ti Dang An Wen Xian Hui Bian*, FHAC, 335, 360–364, 366.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ming Qing Gong Cang Zhong Xi Shang Mao Dang An*, FHAC, 1150–1153.
- <sup>43</sup> Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson, “The Rise of Europe,” 546–579. “Reversal of Fortune,” 1231–1294.
- <sup>44</sup> ZPZZ, FHAC, 04–01–35–0316–04.
- <sup>45</sup> ZPZZ, FHAC, 04–01–35–0307–030, 04–01–35–0346–028, 04–01–35–0358–040.
- <sup>46</sup> Menegon, “Interlopers,” 37.
- <sup>47</sup> Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants*. 350; Ni Yuping, *Steady Customs Duties*, 82.
- <sup>48</sup> Flynn and Giraldez, *China and the birth*.
- <sup>49</sup> Gentzler, *Changing China*; Waley–Cohen, “China and Western Technology,” 1525–1544; Berg, “Britain, industry and perceptions of China,” 269–288.
- <sup>50</sup> Li Bozhong, *Agricultural Development*, 1998.
- <sup>51</sup> JJCSYD, FHAC, 11<sup>th</sup> May, Qianlong 27<sup>th</sup> Year (1762). LFZZ, FHAC, 03–0629–041. ZPZZ, FHAC, 04–01–01–0255–025, 04–01–01–0249–012, 04–01–01–0249–010.
- <sup>52</sup> Perez–Garcia, *Vicarious Consumers*. O’Brien, “Fiscal, Financial and Monetary Foundations,” 161–168.
- <sup>53</sup> ZPZZ, FHAC, 04–01–01–0088–002, 04–01–35–1234–02.

- <sup>54</sup> Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants*.
- <sup>55</sup> Zhou Yuanhe, “Qing Dai Ren Kou Yan Jiu,” 1–28.
- <sup>56</sup> Pu Xia, “Shi Lun Qing Dai Jiang Zhe Di Qu Liang Shi Duan Que Wen Ti,” 25–29.
- <sup>57</sup> Lee and Campbell, *Fate and fortune*; Cao Shuji, *The Population History of China*, 2001.
- <sup>58</sup> Perez–Garcia, “Challenging national narratives,” 53–80.
- <sup>59</sup> Fan Jinmin, “Qing Dai Jin Jiu Jin Qu De Kao Cha,” 92–97.
- <sup>60</sup> ZPZZ, FHAC, 04–01–01–0249–011.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid, 04–01–35–1234–027, 04–01–35–1236–020.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid, 04–01–35–1240–012.
- <sup>63</sup> McKendrick, “The consumer revolution,” 9–33.
- <sup>64</sup> Menegon, “Interlopers,” 37.
- <sup>65</sup> Yan Xiongfei & Lei Yuming, “Xi Fang Chuan Jiao Shi Nan Huai Ren Zai Hua Huo Dong Shu Lue,” 79–82.
- <sup>66</sup> FHAC, *Kang Xi Chao Han Wen Zhu Pi Zou Zhe Hui Bian*, 439.
- <sup>67</sup> FHAC, *Yong Zheng Chao Han Wen Yu Zhi Hui Bian*, 220.
- <sup>68</sup> ZPZZ, FHAC, 04–01–30–0144–003, 04–01–35–0307–018.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid, 04–01–01–0227–019.
- <sup>70</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid, 04–01–14–0029–001.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid, 04–01–01–0089–040.

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